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ABSTRACT

This article summarizes some of the problems of and perspectives on biography for children. The major categories include: "Predominant Defects in Biographies for Younger Children," which discusses unprobed statements, oversimplified explanations leading to false ideas, the omission of "necessary" violence, the infallibility of the hero, the need for interpretation or evaluation, and the lack of women; "Predominant Defects in Biographies for Older Children and Adolescents," which discusses absolutes determining how an individual and his contributions are to be interpreted or evaluated, the exclusion of information that supposedly jeopardizes the image of the hero, success always preceding suffering or deprivation, simplified explanations of technical process, a tendency to judge the person on inadequate evidence, the exclusion of s[illegible], and a willingness to refrain from positive judgments and admit other views; and "Particular Merits in Biographies for Children," which discusses clarity in presentation, critical selection, and actions not generally justified because they set useful precedents or are politically expedient at the time. Also included are a list of books read and sources consulted which identifies highly recommended books and a list of criteria for the evaluation of biography. (WR)

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Biography for Children: A Summary of Problems and Perspectives

I. Predominant Defects in Biographies for Younger Children

A. Unprobed statements--need for more "Hows and Whys"

How does Dolly Madison cope with various political factions at her dinner parties and prevent those with opposing views from antagonizing each other?

Why is Jeanne D'Arc not rescued by the French?

B. Oversimplified explanations leading to false ideas on Ways to "Rise in the World." Does Hero "Make It" alone?

Does Washington become a major in the Virginia Militia at 21 simply because his bravery and skill is recognized by the governor?

To what extent was Carnegie's success dependent upon cultural and familial support?

C. Omission of "Necessary" Violence

What "troubles" did Malcolm X know before he reached adolescence?

What racial tensions did Wilt Chamberlain experience as a boy?

To what extent did the U.S. government follow a policy of exterminating the Indians during "Sitting Bull's" lifetime?

D. The Hero is Infallible

Even if George Washington's cherry tree is missing, is not he still "the original Adam" in the Garden of Eden?

Daniel Webster is praised for keeping the Union together, but by approving of the Fugitive Slave Law, does he not keep the states together under an immoral bond?

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David's treachery, brutality, and sexual relationships--except for one marriage--are excluded; episodes included show his humility and justice.

E. Need for Interpretation or Evaluation

Are we merely to wonder at Hannibal's ingenious military strategems and not, also, wonder about the man, the destruction he inflicted, and the suffering he caused?

F. Where are the Women?

II. Predominant Defects in Biographies for Older Children and Adolescents

A. Absolutes determine how an individual and his contributions are to be interpreted or evaluated. ("Slanting," either/or" reasoning)

Was Marx not prophetic in his statements about the development of capitalism? Is he not, at least, to be admired for showing moral concern for the working class?

Was George Washington's decision to fight the French one made purely out of "loyalty" to the colony; or did economic interests, in part, determine his military role?

B. Exclusion of Information that supposedly jeopardizes the image of the hero.

Were some of Freud's theories really dangerous in that they were made on the basis of inadequate experimentation?

Was Carnegie, to some degree, responsible for the Homestead catastrophe?

C. Success is Always Preceded by suffering or Deprivation and is always achieved through diligence and/or virtue.

Even George Washington knew poverty!

Carnegie's rise is explained solely by his industry and initiative. Sheer luck or manipulation of others is not regarded.

(Poverty is a relative term. How affluent is the writer of the biography?)

D. Need for Simplified explanation of Technical Process to Comprehend Factual Information

How can Fermi's bombardment of uranium be shown so that the reader is able to appreciate the neutron reaction and better comprehend what "splitting the atom" actually means?

E. Better Use of Visual Materials

So that the difficulty of Marco Polo's voyage from Venice to Cathay can be realized, what kind of map, including diagrams of routes, geographical features of areas . . . , might be included?

F. Tendency to judge the person on inadequate evidence or on the basis of how the Contemporary Public accepted the person or his views (conventional standards).

Are Shaw's views wrong or merely tactless?

Is Shaw more an entertainer than a craftsman or serious philosopher--or may not the "shock" device really be considered as the craft, as a means to the philosophical intent?

G. Exclusion of Sex--when significant to understanding of character and/or happenings.

How did the sexual practises among the members of "The Kingdom" especially determine Sojourner Truth to seek "this truth" of God within herself?

How is an understanding of Freud's sexual experience and his views on sex related to his psychological theories?

H. Need for Philosophical discussion as means to an Honest Realization of Person's Accomplishments

What type of socialism did Thomas represent as contrasted to other forms?

By knowing Shaw's views on science, the state, the church, educational institutions, how can we better understand the themes in his plays?

I. Willingness to Refrain from positive judgments and admit other viewpoints.

Did Van Gogh oppose institutions out of an uncontrolable antagonism for anything conflicting with his own ideas; or were these institutions really dishonest and destructive?

J. Need to list books one might consult if reader wants to look at original sources consulted--in order to realize how the author used them; other works on same subject--in order to discover other viewpoints; background materials--in order to gain a fuller understanding of the times; and materials indicating lives of contemporaries, important movements within the lifetime of individual.

USUAL EXCLUSIONS-- of more or less value to a reasonable understanding of a life.

Exact income
Diseases
Books influencing life and works
Religious views
Dates of important occurrences
Wives and children--as more than shadows

III. Particular Merits in Biographies for Children

A. Unusual clarity in Presentation, as well as precision of fact and profundity in analysis.

Information on Buddha as spiritual leader and mythological being is balanced with a discussion of Buddhism, its particular appeal, its distinction from Christian principles. (Betty Kelen, Gautama Buddha in Life and Legend, 1967).

B. Through imaginary, but factually derived conversation, through sensuous description and background information, a vital human being emerges connected to a real time and place.

Pocahontas, against a landscape of ritual and belief, and an authentic geographical setting, is seen physically and felt poignantly.

Anne Sullivan's determination to get knowledge under agonizing conditions is sensitively demonstrated.

C. The need for more critical selection and more lively presentation makes for a fast-paced narrative and exhilerating "presence" (rather than the figure being the extended footnote--as he often is--in adult versions).

Lewis Carroll (James Plaipted Wood, The Snark was A Boojum, 1966) is "flashed on"--playful and pugnacious, puckish and proper, the scandalous eccentric and sober academic. The style romps or rivets with the character's experience. Nor is there any hedging on sexual matters.

D. Actions are generally not justified because of their setting useful precedents or their being politically expedient at the time. Behavior is judged in terms of how others directly benefitted from it or were injured by it.

It is not so important that Catherine de Medici saved the Valor's Monarchy; what is more important is how she destroyed her children's happiness and destroyed the Huguenots in order to do this. (Marguerite Vance, Dark Eminence: Catherine de Medici and Her Children, 1961.)

Henry VIII, frequently praised for removing England from papal jurisdiction and for "cleansing" England of clerical abuses, is realized as unscrupulous and unmerciful, as one who indiscriminately purged-rather than purified. Not only is Henry revealed as a political tyrant, destroying the security and sanity of a nation, but also as a despicable human being who--as Satan--convinced himself he was God. Roberta Strauss Feverlicht's The Life and World of Henry VIII (1970) is one of the best biographies I've read.

Towards New Directions in Writing Biographies for Children

A. More lives of ordinary people--to be able to live the ordinary life is to be a hero. Example: Robert Lawson's They were Strong and Brave.

B. More lives of the "not so great," but significant people. Example: Jean Latham's Carry on, Mr. Bowditch.

C. Lives of the great to include more about individual's relationship to his family; the debt he owed to others for assisting him in realization of goals; and if the life is of a woman, her particular methods of relating a professional to a sexual and/or to a maternal role.

D. More lives of those who have suffered and what sufferings have realized to them or to their families. Example: John Gunther's Death Be Not Proud.

E. Lives of children--child actors, poets--or just children. (A sociological case study like Children of Bondage might be redone as a biography for children.)

F. Parallel Lives--to gain perspective through comparisons and to attain personal awareness--one's own life seems to emerge among the others. Some excellent examples are Charlotte Mayerson's Two Blocks Apart, a "documentary" biography, and Deborah Crawford's Four Women in A Violent Time, an "historical" biography conveying the very texture of early colonial America in the courageous personalities of Anne Hutchinson, Mary Dyer, Lady Deborah Moody, and Penelope Stout.

G. More Biographies on international figures, other than political leaders

AND a book on writing biography geared to CHILDREN.

BIOGRAPHY FOR CHILDREN: PROBLEMS AND PERSPECTIVES

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(* means highly recommended)

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EVALUATION OF BIOGRAPHY

1. Did the biographer live at the same time as his subject? Was he personally associated with the figure he writes about? What is the biographer's background? What are his values and biases?

2. Are the biographer's interpretations of his subject's personality and behavior based on evidence?

3. Is the treatment objective? Impressimistic? Biased or distorted? How can you tell? If myths about the person are incorporated, does the biographer differentiate such myths from the facts?

4. Does the biographer discuss (in preface, text, or afterward) difficulties in composing the biography or in discovering the truth? Does the biographer encourage a critical attitude toward evidence, or does he foster an uncritical acceptance of his biography as gospel?

5. To what extent does the biographer admit that there are unknowns, or unsolvable problems? Does he encourage further inquiry into the life and times?

6. Are sources listed for the child to consult if he wants to explore further in the life and times? (May include primary sources--letters, journals, writings of contemporaries--or secondary sources--histories, criticisms, of the biographies)? Are sources annotated?

7. Is the subject described from the inside (thoughts) as well as the outside (deeds)?

8. To what extent does the biographer use the methods of the story teller or the playwright? To what extent the narrative and analytic method of the historian? Is the writing artistic as well as accurate?

9. Is the tone of the era or the personality of the subject suggested by the biographer's prose style?

10. How does the physical format of the biography contribute to an appreciation of the "life and times"? Pictures? Maps? Chronologies? Typigraphical effects?

11. What is the end effect of the biography? To foster patriotism? A desire to succeed? To provide an inspiring moral example? To suggest a possible career? To enhance understanding of man, social problems, natural laws?

12. Does a distinct theme emerge from the biography? Is it contrived, or does it naturally develop out of the narrative?

13. Does the biography cover "the whole man" (Physical, emotional, intellectual) from birth to death? What is emphasized? What excluded?

14. Does the biographer portray his subject as human, in humane, superhuman? To what extent are weaknesses in character made known?

15. Is the subject described as an individualistic, unique hero or achiever, or are other persons credited with contributing to the achievement?

16. To what extent does the biographer explain the motivation of his subject? Do his explanations stress heredity or environment or the gifted individual's transcendence of such limitations? Other explanations?

17. Does the biographer explain and evaluate the methods by which his subject achieved his purposes. or does he oversimplify the methods while emphasizing the subject's values and ambitions?

18. Do you see the "times" of the person as much as his life"? Is there a good balance of these?

19. Does the biographer show connections between his subject's ideas and actions and those of people who lived after him? Are influences and parallels and contemporary relevance traced?

20. Is the child asked explicity or implicity to relate to the person? On what terms? As worshipper of heroes? As potential imitator of achievement? As understander of human behavior and history?